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## **Helping Campers from Challenging Backgrounds Gain Life Skills**

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Jennifer Rumble

Carolyn Gentle-Genitty

IU School of Social Work

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Summer Camp: An Experience for Life

Author: Jennifer Rumble

Co-Author: Carolyn Gentle-Genitty

IU School of Social Work

902 W. New York Street

Indianapolis, IN 46202

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**Abstract**

This article takes the reader on a journey of a summer camp. With support from the camp community, camps spotlight the importance of positive relationships with people no matter the challenge that besets the child. Summer camps were started to support children during out of school time (Ozier, n. d.) and to offer survival skills for children to thrive in the real world; outside of the immediate relationship of their families. Many camps that focus on the uniqueness of children foster positive, long-lasting, developmental relationships and improve their chances of being successful social citizens.

### Summer Camp

Every child is unique. Every camp is unique and so should the approach to respond to the needs of children in camps. Summer camps were started to support children during out of school time (Ozier, n. d.) and to offer survival skills for children to thrive in the real world; outside of the immediate relationship of their families. Summer camps are a valuable resource for all children, especially, those who have a learning disability and have experienced trauma or situational factors such as homesickness and bullying. It is important to intervene to support children with learning disabilities because a successful session gives these children another way to have fun safely. A disability can hinder a child from attending camp because the child has a fear of rejection (Mishna, 2005; Bardon, Glick, Harada, Parker & Siperstein, 2007). If they make it through the camp session, then they have succeeded over many children who were unable to attend because they stayed home to avoid any conflict, they have a higher chance of being bullied and having homesickness (Mishna, 2005). When a child has homesickness, it can interrupt his or her experience at camp and can hinder the child from coming back or staying at the camp for the week (How to Choose a Camp: homesickness, n. d.; Mishna, 2005; The Council on School Health, Thurber, & Walton, 2007). More so, bullying can be tragic for many children and keep a child home for the summer, especially, if the child had to deal with a previous situation.

These external challenges can be push or pull factors. Rumberger (1987) defined *push effects* as factors present within the child's school environment that harm or impede relationship-forming patterns. *Pull effects* as external factors beyond the child's internal feelings and views. These effects are based on the dynamic and ever-changing milieu of the child and his or her environment (Rumberger, 1987). As these factors interfere with their well being, going to camp

gives them a chance to experience a different perspective of life and give them the support they need for the future. Camps give support, offer possibilities, and demonstrate conflict resolution.

This article takes the reader on a journey of a summer camp. With support from the camp community, camps spotlight the importance of positive relationships with people no matter the challenge that besets the child.

### **Context Story**

The story your about to read will give an understanding of what camps gives to their camp community. The camp I speak of makes you feel like you're in the country but just a few steps away you find yourself right next door to the city. Every time you step on this camp it brings a calming effect on your body and all your worries on the outside world disappear, at least while you are on camp. The beauty of the scenery makes you feel you are on a stage and you are the actor of your own play, this opens up the opportunities to imagine and create your own experience of a world without any worries. This gives you the opportunity to share your experiences with the children without the influences of the outside world and gives them a new perspective on life. This is the type of camp that in my opinion are most accessible to children that need assistance in socialization and to understand their role in this big world. To better understand the type of children that flourish in this camp I'd like to tell you the story of a child that is autistic.

On a sunny summer afternoon at camp, an autistic child was having trouble dealing with the rules of camp and one afternoon the child started to get upset and run from the counselor's. The child started hitting one of the counselors and at one point picked up a chair to throw at the counselor. Luckily, the counselor grabbed the chair out of the child's hands before the chair was thrown. As the rest of the camp watched on, the counselor was able to get the child out of the

area and the child walked towards the exit of the camp. Another staff member assisted by politely asking the child what was wrong and made the child aware of the options if this behavior continued. If the child left the facility, then the staff member would need to call the police. The other option was to call the child's parents so they could go home with their parents. The child pondered over the options as the counselors and staff watched and the child started to cry. The counselor asked, what's wrong? The child replied, "I just want to see my mom". It was hard to realize that the child acted out simply because they could not express their feelings in the appropriate way; instead the child got upset and reacted violently. This child came to the camp with difficulties dealing with consequences and after three day, the child showed an understanding of the consequences of their actions even though it was the last act that got them sent home. This was an amazing experience but it showed that in addition to sporting and outdoor activities, camps provide respite for parents and children while fostering new learning environments where behaviors can be learned, practiced, and enforced. Children can behave as they are and will be taught appropriate behaviors in society. If they were in society, they could have another charge against them. Camps are teaching them to improve their behaviors with consequences that will not ruin their lives forever.

### **Importance of positive relationships**

The importance of positive relationships with people outside of family life can be experienced at camp (ACA, 2006b). Camps give support, offer possibilities, and demonstrate conflict resolution with the help of the camp community to improve children's vision for their future. The three roles camp plays in the campers' life are further discussed.

**Support for the children.** All children can have a valuable experience if they are given the chance to attend camp. Children who might be turned away because of socioeconomic

factors, disabilities or behavior issues are the children in most need of attending camp to improve their life skills so they can work well in society. Children can make a difference in their own lives with the support of an adult who has a dream of helping children change their lives from the camp experience. The children coming to camp have opportunities other children do not receive because of the positive support from adult role models received through camp (American Camp Association (ACA), 2006b). Coming to camp can even give children leadership opportunities as they can become counselors and give other children the support that was given to them during their camp experience (ACA, 2006b).

As one former camper reveals,

This year at school, I was class vice president. And if I did not go to camp, I would have not even thought of trying for a high spot in my school. Camp teaches you so many things that you use in everyday life. (ACA, 2006b, p. 8)

**Possibilities & Conflict Resolution.** The history of the juvenile justice system has been about helping rehabilitate children instead of integrating them into the adult system (Sarri & Ezell, 2008). The juvenile justice system today has changed, and the children are being sent into the adult system as well as the juvenile detention center instead of supporting the children to improve their lifestyles (Sarri & Ezell, 2008). However, children can change their outcome by experiencing summer camp; they could avoid the juvenile justice system. Mishna, Michalski, and Cummings (2001) and American Camp Association (ACA, 2006a) have evaluated camp experiences, and summer camp can improve children's assets and give them opportunities to improve their lives in society. The importance of positive adult mentors being a part of a child's life can help improve their abilities for society such as "support, positive values, positive identity, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to

learning, and social competencies” (Search Institute, 2011). Children’s improvements can be seen over time and the camp environment can give a child a safe place to learn from experiences. The experiences learned from camp can help them resolve conflict in a positive way. According to Brahm (2003), there are seven stages of conflict resolution including “latent, conflict emergence, conflict escalation, hurting (stalemate), de-escalation (negotiation), dispute settlement, and post-conflict (peacemaking)” (para.1). Conflict will always happen in a group with different points of view and different needs. Every group will have a different way of dealing with conflict and it does not have to stay in the order mentioned above. Every time conflict arises, these stages will more than likely be a part of the conflict, keeping in mind that the order can be different and some stages might not happen (Brahm, 2003). According to Shelton (1999) and U.S. Department of Education (2010), if children do not have enough practice dealing with conflict in appropriate ways, then they will react without thinking about the consequences. Teaching children appropriate ways to react to a situation can keep the fighting down at camp and help the child become successful in future conflict situations. According to Shelton (1999) and U.S. Department of Education (2010), the counselors teaching by example can be a wonderful way campers know what to expect or how to deal with conflict on their own. By teaching children better ways to resolve conflict, they will deal with situations differently and give them a chance to be productive citizens. The next step is to explore the outcomes of summer camp.



### Outcomes

The outcomes after attending camp can vary in the social, emotional, cognitive, and value realms.

**Social.** Social skills are associated with children being able to make friends, lead activities, be more open to others, and continue friendships (ACA, 2006b). Social skills are increased after attending camp, but in a couple of areas, social skills were decreased after six months of leaving camp; friendship skills were the only one to decrease directly after camp. Peer relationships and social comfort showed improvements six months after camp ended. These two skills were possibly different because the children remembered lessons from camp and applied them to their lives for the first time (ACA, 2006b; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007; Michalski, Mishna, Worthington, & Cummings, 2003). The camp experience can enhance children's lives by supporting them to learn how to work with other people. Bundy, Ellis, and Roark (2008) reported children improved these skills after returning to the same camp for one to five years after the first camp experience.

**Cognitive.** Cognitive skills are associated with learning new activities and being able to critically think about situations in their lives to protect the life around them (ACA, 2006b). Overall, there were improvements in cognitive development, specifically in "adventure and exploration" (ACA, 2006b, p. 12). This area had the top scores after camp ended but six months later, the scores returned to their original state when the child started coming to camp (ACA, 2006b; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). The scores falling back to pre-camp scores illustrates that environment plays a big part in improvements. During camp, children are learning new things and ready to explore but when they return home, they return to their routine.

**Emotional.** Emotional well being can be associated with people feeling good about themselves and being able to accomplish their goals due to the support of others (ACA, 2006b). According to ACA (2006b), “More than 96% of parents agreed with the statement [,] the people at camp helped my child feel good about him/herself,” and “92% of campers agreed that people at camp helped them feel good about who they were” (pg. 6). Children at camp were having good experiences and in turn were improving their emotional well-being after going home. They continue feeling this way at home and the scores have the highest improvements six months after camp is finished. According to ACA (2006a), a child coming to camp “four years or more” reported feeling supported overall 76% of the time. (p. 11). Ninety-two percent of campers who come to camp for four years or more are being emotionally supported by the camp (ACA, 2006a, p.10). According to Michalski et al. (2003), children improve their emotional well being at camp and show improvement over children who do not attend camp. This gives children attending camp an opportunity to feel better about themselves, which in turn gives them a better outcome in society. An example, if the children are improving their emotional well-being, then in society they can deal with their emotions with others such as a relationship with friends, colleagues, and/or spouses.

**Values.** Values are associated with learning about ourselves, and deciding what activities are appropriate or inappropriate in our own lives. Spirituality means to look into the deeper meanings of life and be able to choose the right path even though it can be a difficult decision (ACA, 2006b). The children did not believe there were any improvements in the “values and decisions” area, but did believe there were improvements in “Spirituality” (ACA, 2006b, p. 14). The parents did see improvements in both areas and believe there was continual growth in their children after six months (ACA, 2006b; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). The

perception of growth was not seen by the children but the parents saw a definite change in their children. The growth in children can be a challenge when they are affected by internal struggles in their lives. Even though the changes were not seen by the children, the differences were noticed by the parents and the children were affected by their experience. When the children do not notice the difference, then their changing behaviors naturally, this in turn can be a huge impact on the children. The staff members or volunteers need to show by example so the children will be able to start forming their own values and spiritually.

### **Conclusion**

The camp experience is an important part of these children's lives and camps need to be another way to help all children with socioeconomic, disability, and behavior issues. Camp is a valuable resource for our society because children will have a better chance of a positive outcome in life if we invest in their future. Summer camp gives children a chance to improve their life skills and enable them to become productive citizens in adulthood.

### Short Biography

*Include short biographical information about yourself, your background, and your experience in the camp field at the end of the article.*

I have been a Physical Therapist Assistant for the past six years, I have decided to add more to my life and receive my master's in Social Work at IUPUI. I have worked the past two years at a summer camp, the first year as a cabin counselor and the second year as the head activity instructor; I facilitate low and high ropes as well. I volunteer for a camp that focuses on grieving children, they have lost someone close to them, and I have done this for 5 years. I love to dance, Salsa and Bachata, hike, camp, and spend time with my family and friends. I have always loved volunteering for the camp mentioned above, the camp makes a difference as does the camp I have worked for the past two years, the lives they change every year makes my heart soar! I have always loved making a difference in a child's life; we all need advocates that will be there for us so we can all be successful in this world of harsh realities.

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